

Blue Maxima Questions

Hi. Thanks for answering my call for people to interview about Flash games. I have a bunch of questions outlined below and the more in-depth your answers, the better, but please don't feel pressured to answer every one of them.

Please note in this list of questions: when I ask you about "Flash games" specifically, I mean the ones released in-browser between 1999 and 2021. If you're still making games with Flash, great! I'd like to hear about it. But since this book is mainly focused on Flash games in the browser, I'd like answers based around that context.

Personal History

- **Tell me about yourself.**

My name is Shawn Tanner and I've been fortunate enough to live as an independent game developer for the last twenty years. I started by creating flash games on Newgrounds as "Afro-Ninja" and also found success on other sites like Armor Games and Addicting Games. My most recent titles have been Steam/Mobile crossovers, but one day I intend to release a fully-fledged console game as well.

- **What Flash games did you make?**

Projects you might recognize me from are Territory War and the "Escape Series" including the Car, Phonebooth, Freezer, and more. Other titles include Newgrounds SIM, Skincraft, and Escape from Crystal Lake

- **How else were you involved in the Flash community?**

In the mid 2000's I spent a lot of time in the Newgrounds flash forum helping out other devs with my mediocre programming skills. I was also generally a very active member of Newgrounds in general, reviewing a lot of portal submissions and eventually moderating the forums.

- **What was your first Flash game that you played, and on what site?**

Technically speaking I believe the first game I played was Tom Fulp's "Microwave the Furby" game on Newgrounds/Assassin

- **What do you remember about the community? How they interacted, voted, shared games with eachother?**

- **What are your favorite Flash games? Both massive and obscure.**

Too many to count, but I always find myself leaning towards games that pushed the limits of what flash was capable of at the time, at least from my own perspective.

Some of those would include Pico's School, Ronin Spirit of the Sword, Madness Interactive, and Ultimate Flash Sonic. Then there's also Don't Shit Your Pants which was not very technical but always deserves to be mentioned.

- **What was your favorite portal and why? Any runner-ups?**

I was happy to upload flash content to any portal but Newgrounds was the original, and the only place I considered "home"

- **What would you consider your strongest memory of Flash gaming? It doesn't have to be necessarily the best.**

- **Do you remember any portals, users or general stories that a casual community member might not know of? I'd love to get some more obscure stories into the book.**

- **Overall, what is your favorite part of Flash games, major or minor?**

Virtually no barrier of entry for anyone to make anything! Plus for a very long time there was almost no money to be made from flash games so everything you saw was the pure result of passion and creativity (even if it was terrible)

Developing for Flash

- **What made you consider developing a Flash game?**

It was the only tool I was aware of that provided such a seamless way to create assets and program them at the same time.

- **How difficult was it for you to get started?**

It took a while to learn flash itself, mostly in terms of understanding its animation features. Once I learned to program it wasn't too hard to bring that knowledge back to flash for making games.

- **What was the first Flash game you released, and on what site? What do you remember about its release?**

My first real game was "Escape From Elm Street," heavily inspired by NES games like Shadowgate and Uninvited. I released it on Newgrounds and to my surprise, a lot of people actually liked and played it!

- **What drew you to making Flash games specifically? Did other platforms like Shockwave, Unity, Java or so on carry any appeal?**

The Newgrounds flash portal was a showcase of what you could do in flash, so to me, there wasn't even anything else worth considering. You could find sites that had collections of Java apps but they were usually pretty terrible.

- **Did you work alone? If not, who did you work with, and how did you meet them?**

I usually worked alone in the beginning but I also showed some of my friends how to use flash so sometimes we would collab on projects for fun. Escape from Crystal Lake was a large joint effort with my friend Joe. Later on I would seek out and pay artists to work on my projects if I thought their style was a good fit. Some of those included BoMToons, Hyptosis, and Poxpower. (And I still work with Pox on Soda Dungeon)

- **Can you give me just a quick, point-by-point overview of how you developed games? The technical side of things purely - how you program for Flash, how you create resources like graphics & sound (if applicable), how functionality improved & things changed in later versions of Flash, anything you can think of that might be noteworthy or interesting to the nerdy-minded.**

I didn't do anything too special here. I was able to draw mostly passable art directly inside of flash. For audio I grabbed a lot of sounds from freesound.org (and still do!) and for music I would browse the audio portal. As time went on I started to hire out art and music to friends that were much better at it. Programming was always my strong point but all I really did was adapt some basic knowledge from my CS program and convert it to actionscript. I've always been weak at math and the more technical side of physics/effects but I could always scrap together what I needed with help from tutorials or friends that were better programmers

- **Were there any interesting technical challenges you had to face while making a game in Flash?**

You had to be incredibly careful with how you used Vector art in flash. It was an easy and versatile format but it quickly bogged down the CPU if you tried to draw too much on the screen, or scale the window too large. Eventually flash introduced "filter" effects that could greatly enhance the visuals in your game but you had to be aware of when and how flash would try to "cache"

them into a bitmap to speed up rendering. Stacking on glow and blur effects without care was an easy way to tank your game's performance

- **What was the development community like? Any forums or boards or other sites that are worthy of mention?**

I think I learned the most from the Kirupa tutorials and forums. I tried to pay that forward by being active in the Newgrounds flash forum.

- **Did you make games as a hobby, on the side, or a full time job? Did it ever get 'serious', and if so, when?**

It went from hobby, to on the side, to full-time. It got serious when I released Territory War, and I carried that into an actual career.

- **What was your first "viral game", what were the circumstances around it, and what was it like inside your head and on your site/portal entry when it did go viral?**

I made Territory War for an Armor Games contest, and it ended up winning first place. I didn't realize the demand for a free, online knockoff of "worms" was so great. It didn't really go viral in today's terms, but it just consistently received a lot of plays. I capitalized on this by creating a sequel with online play and that's when things really picked up.

- **Did you ever have a strategy when making games, marketing or business wise? Or did you just work on what was fun?**

I started by working on what was fun, but if a particular game found success I would make it a point to develop sequels. That's how I ended up making ~7 escape games and two sequels to Territory War.

- **What was it like working with Flash portals like Kongregate? What sort of deals would you make, if any? Did you ever use something like Flash Game License, and if so, can you tell me about your experience with it?**

I used FGL once or twice toward the end of flash's lifespan. It was a nice source of additional revenue but nothing I could sustain myself on. Up until that point I usually had a point of contact with most of the major flash portals to discuss potential sponsorships with.

- **How much did the community support you, and how did they contribute to your success?**

I was heavy into the community side of Newgrounds, interacting on the forums every day and eventually flying to multiple meetups per year. It was a ton of fun and after enough time I gained some recognition for it. On launch day for my games I could usually rally up some extra support from the community.

- **Were you around pre-and-post Macromedia era Flash? Are you able to draw a comparison between the two companies' handling of the technology?**
- **Do you think Adobe buying Flash at the end of the day caused more damage than it would have if Macromedia hadn't been bought out?**
It's really hard to say- Flash was probably doomed either way, but Adobe could have made a harder pivot towards Flash being a fully-featured 2d game engine. Adobe Air makes an effort but has always lagged behind competing engines.

The End of Days

- **At what point did Flash go into "freefall" in the public consciousness, in your point of view?**
- **Have you ever met anyone blatantly anti-Flash or anti-Flash games specifically? Did you try to change their mind? Were you successful?**
- **What didn't you like about Flash as a platform, either during its peak or fall? Anything specifically egregious worth mentioning?**
Flash was packed full of bugs and janky features but since the alternative was "not making games," I can't really complain much.
- **Around what point did Flash stop becoming profitable and/or getting enough back to cover development time? Did this make you want to stop making Flash games?**
Around 2013/2014 there started to be a noticeable decline in revenue for flash ads. A few years prior I had started experimenting with Unity so although I loved flash, I was also willing to do what it took to keep producing games for a wide audience.
- **How many people were still playing your games at the end? Did you ever find out overall total player numbers? Any thoughts on those numbers?**
It's hard to know exact numbers since flash game distribution was so decentralized. Most of my popular games managed to snag a few million plays each, with the Territory War series reaching into the tens of millions and possibly even hundred million range. I'm proud of that of course but I also recognize that view counts are easily inflated so it's hard to compare that to something like sales.
- **Any opinions on the state of the indie gamedev industry, and what it was like compared to Flash at its rise & peak?**
The current industry moves faster because the tools are much more accessible. You can start your game dev career in the Unreal Engine which is *currently* being used to develop AAA games. As great as flash was, it was still a pale imitation of the best tools of that time. The flipside is that it is now harder than ever to get noticed because the expectation of quality is also much higher.

● **How do you feel about Flash having gone away from browsers? Do you miss it? What do you miss the most about it?**

● **If you could do it all again, would you?**

Of course! I have no regrets about flash development

● **What have you been up to since Flash left the public consciousness?**

Thankfully I'm still an independent developer! Since moving away from Flash I've worked with OpenFL and Unity, and I currently develop and maintain a game called Soda Dungeon which is available on iOS, Android, and Steam. I have bigger plans in the pipeline as well but not enough to show for them yet.

● **What do you think of efforts like AwayFL and Ruffle? Do you think they might recapture the magic of Flash in the browser if ever completed?**

I'm really excited about Ruffle. Although there is a lot of work to be done I think it's the future of being able to preserve flash content online.

● **Speaking of recapturing the magic, how do you feel about HTML5 games today?**

I'm glad HTML5 games are trying to carry the torch but they're in a really weird state right now. You can publish just about anything for HTML5 because it's a more open format, but you will probably encounter a lot of performance and compatibility issues. Flash had some of that too but more often than not it just "worked." I don't really seek out HTML5 games to play, I'd rather just spend a few bucks on a game on Steam or itch

● **How can we play your games now that Flash has been exorcised from most browsers?**

Some of my old games are compatible with Ruffle emulation, or through the Newgrounds player. All of my current projects target modern platforms like mobile and PC so hopefully those will stick around for a while.

● **Are you still using Flash for anything in particular today?**

Sadly no, but I have considered reinstalling it to help produce animatics for other projects I am working on

● **Anything else you want to say?**

Thanks for including me! I hope I can continue to produce interesting content for many years to come.